

# *Broadcasting children's music*

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## Broadcasting Children's Music

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**Abstract:** Broadcasting children's music on television and radio is motivated by, and aims to serve, adults' perceptions of children's wants and needs. Children's music in general is shaped by the understanding of what 'childhood' means and, in turn, supports adults' assumptions about childhood. This article develops these ideas in an analysis of examples from the history of British radio and television, beginning in the 1920s and continuing until the growing penetration of online interactive media challenged the status of broadcasting in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The article discusses examples of different kinds of children's music in a broadcast context, including the broadcast of commercial recordings of music for children, such as versions of traditional songs and nursery rhymes as well as pop music aimed at children. It also considers the significance of signature tunes and repeated musical sequences from long-lived and well-loved children's programmes, because they play key roles in differentiating children's programmes from each other and distinguishing children's music from music aimed at adults. Broadcast programmes frequently include music that does not play a central role, when it is used as an accompaniment to drama, entertainment performance or animation. But such music contributes to programmes' tone and shapes their mode of address to an imagined child audience. Entertainment shows or magazine programmes include music performances alongside non-musical sequences and can use music to, for example, mark an occasion for sing-along activities or accompany games. The social function of broadcasting for children watching or listening at home or at school, usually with an adult or other children, is constituted in part by these varied forms of children's music. These forms of music shape conceptions of childhood through particular kinds of listening practices and ways of belonging to an audience.

**Keywords:** Music, broadcasting, public service, Britain, BBC, radio, television, schools, childhood, entertainment.

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## Introduction: Broadcasting and Childhood

The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was established in 1922 with a monopoly on radio broadcasting given to it by government. It had freedom from direct state interference and a guarantee of independent income deriving from a licence fee paid by all owners of radio receivers. However, in exchange for these privileges, it was required to fulfil public purposes: to inform, educate and entertain its audience (Scannell, 1990). One part of that audience was children, and only a month after BBC broadcasts began, an engineer at the regional BBC station serving Birmingham in the midlands of England presented the first few minutes of programming aimed specifically at a child audience (Hartley, 1983, p. 16). The engineer, Mr A. E. Thompson, told a story about two dwarves called Spick and Span and played a gramophone record of children's music, Antonio Bazzini's 'La Ronde des Lutins' ('Dance of the Goblins', 1852). Other regional BBC stations began to devote specific times—a *Children's Hour*—to children's broadcasts in the afternoon. Throughout the early 1920s, station staff became known to their listeners as 'Uncles and Aunts' who told stories, cracked jokes and sang songs with piano accompaniment. All broadcasting was live and maintained an informal tone, seeming spontaneous, though basic details concerning each day's broadcast were given in advance in the BBC's weekly publication *Radio Times* (1923–present). Although regional staff devised and presented their own programme content, there was a national BBC policy that specified music as part of the expected output:

If the organisers of Children's Hour keep in mind the creation of the atmosphere of a good home and the presentation of real beauty in song, story, music and poetry on a plane attractive to the young, they will inevitably, without self-conscious effort, raise the standard of culture in their young listeners and as a result will be educative in the best sense. (*BBC Handbook*, 1928, as cited in Hartley, 1983, p. 23)

This text encapsulates many of the taken-for-granted assumptions that would affect the broadcasting of children's music for decades thereafter. It implies that children's broadcasting should be contained within a specific schedule position (namely, during *Children's Hour*) and planned by adult staff allocated to this task. It is recommended that the broadcasters should 'emulate the atmosphere of a good home', partly because children listened within domestic spaces and, thus, often with one or more siblings and/or parents. Moreover, the concept of 'a good home' is evaluative and emblematises a whole complex of social and cultural values intended to be embodied in the programmes. It is recognised that the diet of children's broadcasting should be varied, composed of 'song' and 'music' and other aspects, and should aim to interest and involve the child audience. While broadcast output should not be over-deliberate in its aims, it should 'raise the standard of culture' and be 'educative'.

The original meaning of 'broadcasting' was the scattering of seed over soil, and the term was adopted in 1921 to signify the transmission of radio and television signals (Winston, 1998). The word 'broadcasting' had connotations of fertility, growth, renewal and promise, and in relation to children's broadcasting in the 1920s and 1930s the implication was that children were like fertile land that could be stimulated to bear a useful crop. The metaphor of casting seed also implied that the process was under the control of a single agent: the broadcaster. However, similar to the farmer's seed thrown rather indiscriminately over the earth, the broadcaster could never be sure of exactly where radio and television were being received nor by whom. There was no feedback mechanism that provided knowledge about exactly which listeners or viewers were using a broadcast or how they were using it. Although the etymology of 'broadcasting' and the word's relationship with growing crops are now little known, the residue of the metaphor is the assumption that broadcasting can lead to cultural growth and useful social results. However, there is a constitutive delay between casting the seed (i.e. sending the signal) and its arrival at its destination, and it is impossible to know in advance whether the seed (i.e. the message) will

take hold and lead to a desired result. There is a gap, or absence, at the heart of the communicative relationship. This is especially true in children's broadcasting, because it is created and disseminated by adults, not children. Children always exist for adult broadcasters as an imagined audience, as an Other with whom they can never have an equal, reciprocal communication. Estimating audience figures or conducting surveys of listeners or viewers, for example, promise knowledge about audiences, but these procedures are not only unreliable in practice when used to evaluate child audiences, they are flawed in principle because the knowledge they produce must be an abstraction derived from statistical manipulation (Ang, 1991). Adults define children as people Other to themselves, and broadcasters define audiences as the Other whom they address. This dual Otherness of child audiences for broadcasting makes them a fascinating subject for historical and theoretical work influenced by postmodernist, deconstructive critical thinking that is interested in the limits of knowledge and its ambivalences (Bignell, 2000).

## Children's Radio: Learning to Listen

The image of the child taken for granted by the BBC in the early years of broadcasting was of an innocent but wayward listener who radio would address within the home, with parents nearby, and who would be introduced to the best of culture and to the best ways of perceiving it and responding to it. The cultivation of attention was a key part of this so that, rather than simply hearing music on radio as an aspect of ambient sound, children at home would actively listen. The media historian Kate Lacey (2016) has written eloquently about children listening to radio:

it was not just in terms of the program content that the cultural welfare of children would be enhanced and protected, but in the act of listening itself. The image of the 'good' child listener was disciplined, obedient, engaged, responsive—and most likely middle-class. Quiet, attentive, respectful listening to programs designed to educate and inspire was akin to concentrated, silent reading of fact and fiction, and a skill that had to be nurtured and honed. (pp. 154–155)

Music broadcast to children was not broadcast for its own sake but was a means to engage children in listening as a specific and active mode of attention. The pedagogic aim to elicit and reward active listening by both children and adults was part of the ideology underpinning the public service functions of broadcasting, at least until the 1980s when an ideology of consumer choice gained ascendancy (O'Malley, 1994), but even then, choice was also conceived as an active mode of engagement with broadcasting. Music addresses the child listener or viewer and implicitly asks him or her to take his or her prescribed place among the audience shaped by the music. Broadcast music creates audiences and, consequently, communicative relationships. Broadcast music teaches children how to be in an audience and, thus, to exchange otherness for belonging.

Since the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, children in Britain have experienced broadcasting throughout their lives. As Janet Adam-Smith (1947) wrote for the BBC's internal magazine, *BBC Quarterly*:

The child of today is likely to be in contact with the wireless from birth. He has the slenderest chance of being born into home without a wireless set. As he lies beside his mother in his first cot, she has one ear cocked to the loudspeaker. She nurses him to the soothing background of *Music While You Work*. As he toddles around the kitchen, the machine on the dresser is helping to beguile his mother's boredom at peeling the potatoes. (p. 162)

Listening to (and, later, viewing) broadcasting is an aspect of belonging and having a place in the home, family and society. In the social history of Britain and other developed nations, the experience of broadcasting is a key aspect of the reproduction of culture (Williams, 1981), including ideologies of child-rearing and family life (Ferguson, 1985) of which children's music is a part. Children live in a sound-world in which they are already always audiences for mediated, organised, broadcast sound. Because membership of an audience implies passivity, the questions that haunt children's music are whether participation in listening is active and what the relationship between listening and other kinds of activity might be.

Imagining the child audience in the home (as opposed to in school) meant that *Children's Hour* was specifically designed to have a different tone from BBC educational programmes (Briggs, 1995, pp. 236–239). Its address could be personal, and it was a regular feature of programmes that personal birthday congratulations were announced on-air when children wrote to their local radio station. While much of *Children's Hour* was devoted to speech, mainly upbeat and chatty presentations by announcers and guests, music always played a significant part of the programme. For example, the *Children's Hour* of 17 October 1923 (BBC, 1923, p. 81) included a talk on orchestral instruments by Uncle Jeff (Stanton Jefferies), followed by a performance of Roger Quilter's *A Children's Overture* (1914), the first orchestral music broadcast by an instrumental ensemble. *Children's Hour* was always a varied recipe of sounds, including speech, animal noises and different kinds of music performed live from the studio. Local groups of listening children were formed, and children regularly sent letters to *Radio Times* commenting on programmes. There was a tone of familiarity and some limited forms of interaction with the BBC, encouraged by the personae of Uncles and Aunts adopted by *Children's Hour* staff (Hartley, 1983, pp. 16–29). By 1926, the BBC had become anxious about this informality and attempted to remove the titles of Uncles and Aunts by, for example, omitting them in the *Radio Times* listings of the programmes' cast and production teams. But many parents and children wrote to the BBC to complain, leading to the reinstatement of Uncle and Aunt radio personalities in 1927. As Uncles and Aunts, broadcasters were ambivalently positioned as both insiders and outsiders to the imagined nuclear family of parents and children at home.

The normative family imagined by BBC policy comprised a father at work and a mother at home with one or two children. Good parenting meant giving children access to a wide range of cultural resources and inculcating proper attitudes and behaviour. For example, parents ideally should encourage children to read books, listen to radio talks and share experiences like country walks or going to a music concert. However, it was thought that working class parents may not have time and resources to give sufficient attention to their children and that children's leisure might take place not in the domestic environment that housed the radio but rather in the street with its unsupervised and potentially unwholesome or dangerous activities. Radio needed to supply enriching experiences of cultural life that would keep children inside the home. For example, in the late 1920s, the BBC broadcast at least seven series of *Concerts for School Children*, usually at 15.45 when children were arriving home from school. Despite their title, the concerts were for children of school age to listen to at home, rather than for listening at school. They were produced by a philanthropic organisation, the People's Concert Society, and the music was comprised of largely well-known classics by Beethoven, Haydn or Mozart or selections of shorter pieces such as Elizabethan madrigals. The listings of these concerts often included lengthy and informative text intended to inform parents about the music when listening with their children, such as this example from 17 December 1926:

Elizabethan Music. Here are three examples of the delicately-woven choralism of three hundred years ago. The first is a setting of words that have become very familiar, their

warning burden being 'Men were deceivers ever'. One of the most popular of all Madrigals is Festa's 'Down in a Flou-ry Vale'. It is also one of the oldest that most people are likely, nowadays, to hear. Its composer belonged to the Papal Choir, and was one of the leading men who gave the real start to the great unaccompanied choral music of the sixteenth century. Thomas Morley was a contemporary and possibly friend of Shakespeare, who set to music some of the Poet's songs. The piece now sung is called a Ballet. This was a lighter kind of Madrigal, with a care-free 'Fa-la-la' refrain. (BBC, 1926, p. 27)

The tone of this text is typical of *Radio Times*' information about children's broadcasting; it is a light-hearted, informal mode of address seemingly aimed more at parents than children. Broadcasting was intended to beneficially shape the enculturation and maturation of children, and parents' adoption of children's programmes as part of their parenting and the culture of family life also aimed to enrich adults' cultural experience. Listening disciplined adults' relationships with children along ideological and class lines (Lacey, 2016), especially mothers because they were the ones expected to be at home with children.

During the Second World War, *Children's Hour* was reduced to 40 minutes, but a Sunday afternoon programme was added which had not only a large child audience but also encouraged family listening. Derek McCulloch (1945), known as Uncle Mac and BBC's Director of *Children's Hour*, commented that, in addition to dramatised literature, which was always featured, 'Regular orchestral concerts and concerts by children's choirs and child performers have proved highly successful. In the two latter categories healthy rivalry has been set up between young listeners and competitors throughout our broadcasting regions' (p. 68). As part of the community cohesion and participation that were encouraged during wartime, children's music demonstrated the resilience of the national spirit. Sunday afternoons were also used for talks about music—especially the works of well-known classical composers—by Helen Henschel (daughter of pianist, composer and conductor Sir George Henschel), with piano and gramophone record accompaniment. Children's programmes continued despite reduced resources. Programming for adults already included significant amounts of popular music, and BBC experimented with music request programmes for children like those broadcast to adults. A memo from the Controller of Programmes in 1942 reported that:

It soon became evident that the idea [of playing music requested by children] was deteriorating into an endless procession of demands for jazz and sentimental crooning records. ... A good antidote for this poison was (a) recitals of carefully chosen gramophone records with direct commentary or speech link and (b) rather amusing programmes of contrasts in records, e.g. *Cherry Ripe* could be compared with Crumit's *Song of the Prune*, etcetera. (as cited in Lacey, 2016, p. 156)

There was always a tension between encouraging participation by children in the choice and performance of music and the perceived need to control how music was selected and presented.

*Listen with Mother* was a programme for the under-fives launched in 1950 and broadcast in the early afternoon. The daily 15-minute slot both began and ended with a variation on Gabriel Fauré's 'Berceuse' (1864) from his *Dolly Suite*, music intended to encourage children to sit still and listen, relaxed, with their mothers or grandmothers. The first spoken words of the programme were the question, 'Are you sitting comfortably?', which were then followed by sung nursery rhymes and traditional songs accompanied on the piano. The intention was that the music would be delivered simply and clearly, providing a model for children and their parents to sing together at home, both with the broadcast and then afterwards in their own time. Lacey (2016) reports that, despite attempts to keep children sitting still and relaxed, letters written to BBC producers suggested that some children enjoyed dancing about

while listening to the radio, joining in songs by adding physical movement (p. 160). While attentive listening might have been the predominant mode of experiencing children's music, some listeners' reactions suggest much greater physical interactivity and less disciplining by the enclosed, triadic relationship between child, parent and radio receiver. This tension between disciplined listening and its association with passivity, in contrast to attempts to engage children actively at the cost of spontaneous and ungoverned responses, is a persistent theme in the history of broadcasting (Bignell, 2002; Buckingham, 2005).

The presentational style and the musical content of BBC radio for children were designed to be entertaining, and used repeated catchphrases and a playlist of repeated music, each of which invited children to join in and perhaps to sing-along. Uncle Mac was initially the main presenter of *Children's Favourites* (1954–84) on Saturday mornings on BBC radio, introducing a mix of novelty songs and contemporary pop recordings. Novelty songs included music deriving from the stage variety shows of an earlier era such as 'How Much is that Doggy in the Window?' or music associated with the comic performer from Second World War radio entertainment, Arthur Askey, such as 'The Bee Song'. In the former, the song includes repeated opportunities to make barking sounds, 'Woof, woof!', and, in the latter, a listener can join in with Askey's 'Bzz bzz' bee noises. Pop songs that were frequently played included the signature tunes of contemporary television adventure drama *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (1955) and songs used in Disney's children's films such as 'When I See an Elephant Fly' from *Dumbo* (1941). BBC reorganised its stations in 1967 to compete with commercial pop radio broadcast from outside the UK, leading to the playing of more pop chart recordings. However, even before this, links with pop culture were signalled by playing records performed by contemporary television personalities like the comedian Charlie Drake and pop singer Max Bygraves. The music choices perpetuated a relatively unchanging repertoire of songs aimed specifically at children, and also introduced children to contemporary pop chart radio for a general, family audience. Radio for children addressed them as a particular music audience, and also took part in their assimilation into the audience for adult consumer culture.

## Music for Schools: Listening to Learn

Scheduling was a precondition and modifying framework for how music was listened to in schools and how it was linked to other aspects of the school experience. Each programme was usually about 20 minutes duration, broadcast at a set time on a specified day each week during the school year, according to a schedule published in advance. This enabled schools to integrate listening to programmes into their timetabled lessons. Scheduling is another means of disciplining the broadcast audience by establishing regularities of timing and duration and patterns of expectation about what a programme will contain, such as its genre, tone or thematic content (Ellis 2000). The two predominant modes of experiencing music in schools, first in radio and then in television, were (1) education via listening to speech or music and (2) expression, whether by moving rhythmically to music or by making music in the form of singing or instrumental playing (Cox, 2002). Schools needed to be able to position the radio receiver (and later the television set) in a demarcated space to allow attention and concentration. Moreover, within that space, the child's body was controlled, most often by enforcing stillness via closing eyes or lying down but also potentially by encouraging forms of movement related to exercise or expressive dance. There were set times for music and established ways of engaging with it, and these routines and modes of action took specific social and physical forms. Sometimes they required special equipment (like musical instruments) or special clothing (like gym knickers and plimsolls for dancing). Music was conceived of as a social good in itself, as a cultural resource to be reproduced and transmitted to schools. By contrast,

this liberal objective required that its broadcast forms and its modes of reception be highly regulated and systematised.

When the BBC first started broadcasting weekly talks to children on 4 April 1924, the inaugural programme was a lecture about music by Sir Walford Davies, professor of music at the University of London and an accomplished organist and composer. By 1939, there were about 11,000 schools registered to receive BBC radio for educational use. Even during the Second World War, Mary Somerville (1945), Director of School Broadcasting, wrote that:

There has been a movement away from what children 'ought to learn' toward studying what children of different types of ability will actually respond to at different ages with interest and profit in the way of facts and ideas and experiences. There has been a movement to include within the framework of legitimate school activities not only the practice of arts and crafts but the enjoyment of music and drama; there has been a movement to break down the barriers between the old school 'subjects'. (p. 64)

One motivating factor for this integration of music and the arts into schools radio was that educational theory was moving towards what we might consider today to be the liberal approaches adopted in the later 20<sup>th</sup> century, in which music, art and drama were included in the standard curriculum alongside reading, writing and arithmetic. Moreover, the constraints of wartime made reflection, adaptation and innovation in teaching methods necessary. There was a shortage of teachers, and teachers were burdened with additional duties of care and afflicted by a shortage of resources such as musical instruments or transport for visits to music performances. Somerville reported that BBC radio broadcast 31 different programmes each week, belonging to series on music, poetry, history, geography and citizenship (pp. 64-66). Broadcasting had an important role in responding to new thinking about pedagogy, and bringing a breadth of experience into the classroom to enrich the relatively impoverished lives of wartime children.

Music programmes for schools were not only designed for static listening, but also as part of a compulsory regime of indoor physical activity. One of the most-adopted programmes was *Music and Movement* (1934-73). This programme was designed to be experienced in a large, open room such as the school gymnasium or assembly hall. Teachers relayed and mediated the instructions given by the programme presenter, who introduced activities linked to the playing of short pieces of music. For example, a week's episode of *Music and Movement* on BBC Radio 4 on 31 January 1968 was on the theme of spring (BBC, 1968, p.48). The presenter introduced the theme, associating spring with awakening from winter and the beginnings of growth in the natural world, blossoming and warmth. During the programme, children undertook physical activity to interpret the music and match the week's theme. The presenter told each child to find a space and curl up on the floor into the smallest shape that he or she could, imitating the bulb or roots of a plant in the soil. Then, accompanied by music, each child was asked to gradually uncurl, raising himself or herself to an upright position, extending arms and hands upward to express the growth and blossoming of a plant or tree. Similarly, music could be used to accompany skipping, hopping or jogging around the room. The overall aim was to use broadcasting to encourage children's expressive use of their bodies, so that they would benefit from beneficial exercise, flexibility and coordination.

Television for school-age children began in 1957, when the BBC and the Independent Television (ITV) commercial channel broadcast to the few schools that had access to television sets on their premises. There was no technology for recording transmissions for later use, but the reach and breadth of music for children was significantly impacted by developments in transmission and recording



technology.<sup>2</sup> In 1963, John Scupham, the BBC's Controller of Educational Broadcasting, spoke about some of the imminent developments. In 1964, a second television channel, BBC2, would begin, with national coverage expected by 1966. Scupham knew that the BBC's Third Programme channel on radio (later called Radio 3) would have extended broadcasting hours, and in due course a network of local radio stations would be created. All this meant more space in radio and television schedules for school programmes. Some schools were already experimenting with closed-circuit television transmission linking classrooms together, and there were also experiments with local broadcasting for schools (Scupham, 1964, p. 3). By the early 1960s, videotape allowed both television and radio to be recorded and used in classrooms. For Scupham, development of these resources represented

an opportunity to develop still further the educational uses of radio, in which Britain has always led the world, and to make as extensive use of educational television as Japan, with a channel devoted entirely to school uses and regular programmes in colour for primary schools, or Italy with its Telescuola, are already doing. (p. 4)

Many radio and television music programmes, such as BBC TV's *Music Workshop* (1964–66) and its successors, were planned so that each episode would introduce songs, instruments or pieces of music that would incrementally integrate with each other in the creation of a show or concert that schoolchildren could perform at the end of the school term. Musical skill and knowledge were assumed to be developmental, participatory and associated with self-improvement, conforming with the principles of growth and productivity (deriving from the metaphor of casting seed to grow crops) that underlay the concept of broadcasting itself.

The BBC was not the only British broadcaster with a public service commitment to broadcasting for children. In fact, as soon as an advertising-funded, commercial television network, ITV, was established in 1955, comprising regional companies contributing to both local and national schedules, ITV was obligated by legislation to provide both school programmes and programmes for children at home. The Independent Broadcasting Authority (IBA), responsible for governing the commercial ITV channel, celebrated its heritage in school programmes with 20 pages of discussion regarding 'Learning through Television' in their annual review, *Television and Radio 1979*. The IBA summarised its output thus:

Educational programmes fill different roles for three broadly defined audiences—pre-school, school and post-school. For the youngest learners, the programmes aim to broaden their experience of the world, to explore relationships with others, and to develop perception and psycho-motor skills through the simple devices of songs, stories, animation and puppetry. These are perhaps the earliest organised learning opportunities for the pre-school child, seven out of ten of whom do not get any kind of nursery education or playgroup experience. For school children and students in colleges, educational broadcasts provide at first-hand a range of educational experiences not normally accessible to the teacher in the classroom. (Croston, 1979, p. 51).

The IBA regularly collaborated with the BBC's School Broadcasting Council to undertake research into the usage of schools programming. In 1979, the IBA reported (as cited in Croston, 1979, p. 54) that 76% of schools in the UK had used some of the ITV companies' 600 hours of school television programming in the preceding year, with each school utilising an average of four different programme series. Secondary schools at this time were rapidly acquiring video recording equipment, making it possible to repeat and flexibly schedule television in the classroom, with 69% of schools using video recorders. About 70% of viewings of programmes in class were videotaped recordings, though the smaller and less well-funded primary school system in Britain still relied almost entirely on live broadcasts. BBC Schools

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<sup>2</sup> See also Askerøi (2017) in this issue, who addresses developments in recording technology in his analysis.

broadcasting on BBC1 included, for example, the series *The Music Arcade* in 1982 (Down, Marson & Perry, 2009). The weekly programmes, transmitted during school terms in spring and autumn, had a thematic focus. From January to March, the ten episodes included such titles as 'Film Music', 'Playing Percussion', 'The Recording Studio' and 'Folk Tunes and the Violin'. The autumn series included 'Rhythm', 'Keyboards', 'Early Music' and, as the end of the year celebrations approached in November, 'Pantomime Preparation'. The programmes aimed to educate about music history, instrumentation, rudimentary theory of music and some of the major cultural forms of music.

Music was always an established part of television output for schools, but it competed unequally with what were perceived as 'core' subjects such as mathematics and English language and a changing roster of short-term priorities resulting from political pressures or media panics. For example, in the early years of the conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher's government (1979–1990), many hours of programming on both the BBC and ITV were aimed at teenagers looking for their first job due to the shrinkage of Britain's manufacturing industries. This was also the era when AIDS was publicly recognised, and broadcasters made numerous programmes about sexual health (Holland, Chignell & Wilson, 2013). Short-term priorities like these reduced the priority given to children's music, which was already relatively vulnerable in comparison to 'core' curriculum subjects. It is also notable that music programmes for schools tended to replicate the gender divisions in participation and instrument choices that prevailed in the formal education system (Green, 1997). Participation was skewed towards girls more than boys, and girls were more likely to be seen singing or playing keyboards and stringed instruments in performances of classical music as opposed to boys' preponderance in, for example, electric instruments, pop and jazz. Broadcasting that featured schools' music did not challenge gender divisions in school that themselves reflected social norms in music-making beyond the school environment.

## Television Entertainment: Seeing Music

Once the BBC television service launched in 1936, the first children's programmes were 10-minute broadcasts of *For the Children* in 1937, beginning with a performance by a clown called Zenora (Vahimagi, 1994, p. 7). These very short broadcasts ceased when television was shut down at the outbreak of war in 1939, but they began again in 1946. The post-war *For the Children* slot included, for example, *Muffin the Mule* in which a marionette mule frisked to songs and piano accompaniment by the on-screen host Annette Mills. Radio for children had always been affected by an anxiety that the relationship between broadcaster and listener would encourage passivity in the child audience, to be remedied by stressing collective listening (usually with the mother) and children's activity both during and after programmes (Wagg, 1992). Children's television had to deal with the same anxieties because of the perception that viewing would physically position the child statically within the space of the home, gazing at a screen in the corner of a room. In 1950, *Muffin the Mule* became part of a new weekday sequence of daily marionette programmes, *Watch with Mother*, each with an adult parental figure as a narrator who would encourage children to take part by joining in with songs or physical actions like clapping (Oswell, 1995). Since the television set is likely to be placed indoors, among the domestic objects of the household, the performance of music in a television studio both makes a link with the viewer's own interior environment and establishes the difference and distance between the represented on-screen space and the child viewer's own space. The television apparatus not only provides access to images and sounds of music and parallels the studio with the home but also separates the viewer from the space where the musical performance takes place. Music performances on television are characterised by both inclusion and exclusion, both presence and absence. A programme host's address

to the child viewer, and invitations to take part in music, both recognise and attempt to redress the separation between the space of viewing and the space of on-screen performance.

From the beginning, television programmes for older children represented children as active physically and culturally. The early magazine programme *Whirligig* (1950–53), for example, like the later *Blue Peter* (1958–present), represented children's activity in the form of hobbies, sport and outdoor recreation. This included musical activity, such as the appearances of Girl Guide bands or children's drumming groups in the *Blue Peter* studio (Beauchamp, 2012). *Blue Peter* invited viewers to interact with the programme by writing letters to its presenters, engaging in charitable and volunteer activity and participating in competitions. The presenters adopted direct address to the camera, positioning the viewer as 'you' and as part of the 'we' of the audience community. Showing examples of children's activity (like playing musical instruments, or taking part in charity fundraising) meant that children were explicitly addressed as producers and participants in culture as well as passive consumers, and the viewing relationship they had with *Blue Peter* was promoted as interactive rather than passive. Music as a topic appeared in various ways across children's television, with the intention of informing and educating the audience about music's cultural history and role. For example, the ITV network broadcast *Clapperboard* (1972–82), a series about current cinema releases and film history, and it devoted two *Clapperboard* episodes in 1977 to documentary features about film music (Croston, 1977, p. 101). The presenter, Chris Kelly, interviewed composers of film music (including John Barry, well-known for composing the *James Bond* film theme), and the programme traced the changing ways that film scores were written and recorded, from the orchestral scores of the classical Hollywood era to the electronic and jazz-influenced film music of the 1970s. The aim to enable the child audience to understand how music is made is linked to the aim for children to be more informed and active listeners to music, rather than simply its consumers.

Children's programmes produced for the major American networks have been a means of delivering child audiences to advertisers of products marketed to children, such as toys, breakfast cereal and confectionary (Kline, 1993). Throughout the history of British television, there has been strong resistance to US children's entertainment programmes because of a fear of Americanisation, which has been regarded as virtually synonymous with consumerism (Rixon, 2006; Bignell, 2011). The association between programmes and products extended to programmes featuring characters and narratives that cross-promoted ranges of toys (e.g. Care Bears, My Little Pony and Transformers) with music and iconography shared by the programmes and the products' advertisements. Therefore, policy debates about media effects centre not only on representations of violence or sexuality but also on children's susceptibility to marketing. Pop music and the products associated with its performers were advertised by animated programmes like *The Jackson Five* (1971) and *The Osmonds* (1972), each imported from the United States and raising fears of a 'disappearance' of childhood innocence, at risk from commodity culture and cultural imperialism (Postman, 1983). While these pop music series showcased commercial music performers and products, British animations also featured music prominently. Examples include the series *Camberwick Green* (1966) and its spin-offs *Trumpton* (1967) and *Chigley* (1969), each of which had specially written songs performed by Brian Cant, accompanied on guitar. Since each animated character in the series had a song, and these songs were repeated when the character appeared in the episode's story, viewers became very familiar with the music. Music from the programmes was available commercially in the form of long-playing records, re-telling abbreviated versions of television episodes with priority given to the songs. Similarly, the puppet action-adventure series *Supercar* (1961), *Fireball XL5* (1962), *Stingray* (1964–65), *Thunderbirds* (1965–66), *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons* (1967–78) and *Joe 90* (1968) were made in Britain and featured extended sequences set to music. The

limited character expression and narrative complexity possible in drawn animation and puppetry meant that music was foundational to the programmes' tone, pace and mood.

The advent of BBC2 in 1964 made it possible to launch programmes for pre-school children such as *Play School* (1964–88) (Holmes, 2016), but until 1972 there were government controls on the number of hours of broadcasting permitted per week. Thereafter, both the BBC and ITV used the opportunity of a longer broadcast day to introduce a greater range of programming for children. Programmes for the under-fives on the commercial ITV network were scarce, but after some test screenings of the imported American programme *Sesame Street* (1969–present) in 1971, the four largest ITV companies committed themselves to producing more programmes for young children (Croston, 1978, p. 75). There was public controversy and an official report (ITA, 1972) that was critical of *Sesame Street*'s rapid succession of animations, puppets and adult presenters in the studio and filmed inserts. British programmes followed *Sesame Street* regarding the significance of music both to accompany specially shot material and as a repeated feature associated with particular characters and interactive singing experiences. ITV's palette of children's music drew on these influences such as in Thames Television's *Rainbow* (1972–92), where the human presenter Geoffrey's interactions with hand-operated puppets George and Zippy, as well as with the suited teddy-bear Bungle, were frequently organised around songs. In each episode a 'house band', named Rod, Jane and Freddy after its three members, presented musical performances with interactive elements encouraging children to dance or mime actions to music. The programme's lengthy theme song, played over a colourful animation, became familiar to generations of British people.

Research into children's viewing practices has assimilated music within the broader approach characterising their viewing as 'active attention' (Lemish, 2007, pp. 40–45), where sound is one of the ways that television elicits and holds children's interest. The signature tunes of programmes, often repeated and in some cases broadcast for decades if a programme runs for a long time, have some of the familiarity and repetition associated with nursery rhymes and children's songs, and their specific musical forms are arguably less significant than the fact of their familiarity (Altman, 1986, p. 43). Such would be the case in Britain for ITV's *Magpie* (1968–80), the BBC's *Blue Peter* (1958–present) or the BBC science fiction drama *Doctor Who* (1963–89, 2005–present), each of which were aimed predominantly at child audiences. The programmes' signature tunes have distinct music qualities and identities; for example, the *Magpie* theme song was a pop tune with traditional folk lyrics, performed by the successful band The Spencer Davis Group, while *Blue Peter*'s was an arrangement of the folk tune 'Barnacle Bill', and *Doctor Who*'s original music was an electronic piece made on experimental synthesisers by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop.

Each tune has a specific signification. The *Magpie* tune used the lyrics of a traditional song referring to counting magpie birds: 'One for sorrow / Two for joy / Three for a girl / Four for a boy ...' but signalled the programme's branding as up-to-date and fashionable via the use of electric guitars and synthesised keyboard sounds in the song's instrumentation, befitting the brand values of the commercial television network on which it aired (Johnson and Turnock, 2005), rather than the 'stuffy' and 'old-fashioned' BBC. *Blue Peter*'s title refers to a ship's flag, and the 'Barnacle Bill' tune is a sailor's hornpipe (Marson, 2008). The signature tune remained the same between 1958 and 1978, rearranged for electronic instruments only in 1979 when the programme featured a guest appearance by pop composer Mike Oldfield (who made the hugely successful album *Tubular Bells* in 1973). This version lasted until 1989, and modifications of the same tune still are used for the programme more than 50 years after its first broadcast. While the programme title and musical form are now unlikely to have any nautical resonance for a contemporary child audience, it is the repetition and continuity of the music that is significant. *Doctor Who* was highly distinctive sonically in the early 1960s, referencing the connections

between science fiction and electronic music. This sonic link to modernity was achieved by the experimental BBC composer Delia Derbyshire's conscious adoption of the avant-garde techniques of *musique concrète* for its signature tune and incidental music based on sound manipulation using magnetic tape (Donnelly, 2007). Although the music was periodically updated and rearranged, its themes and style remained constant from *Doctor Who*'s beginning until the series was cancelled 26 years later. When the series was re-booted in 2005, the same music and some sound effects were recreated, though with different instrumentation and tempo. While the specific connotations of music can have more or less precision as indicators of genre, tone or mood, some British children's programmes have extreme longevity, and, thus, their music acquires special significance.

The centre-to-periphery model of broadcasting waned because of three historical developments in the 1980s (Winston, 1998). Deregulation enabled new commercial providers of radio and television services to erode the mass audiences of the BBC and ITV networks. Narrowcasting to niche audiences defined by their age, sex, social status or lifestyle interests began to challenge broadcasting to a general audience. New technologies, especially videotape, diminished the significance of scheduling, and thus broadcasters' control over audiences, because viewers could watch programmes at a time of their own choosing. These aspects of the marketisation and privatisation of the British media threatened the ideology of public service that governed broadcasting for children. Radio broadcasting for children had already become increasingly marginal; *Children's Hour* on radio ceased in 1964 because of reduced audiences resulting from competition with children's television, and *Listen with Mother* was cancelled in 1982. On television, BBC programmes for schools were moved to a late-night block named *BBC Learning Zone* in 1995, screening new and repeated programmes for all levels of children's education as well as for adult learners. Teachers, parents and adult students were expected to use videotape technology to record programmes for subsequent viewing, but budget cuts led to the cancellation of all BBC's Schools programming in 2015. The commercial ITV channel shifted its school programmes to the minority broadcaster Channel 4 in 1987 to expand schedule time for more lucrative programmes, and Channel 4 continues to screen educational programming that is also available online. Britain moved wholly from analogue to digital broadcasting in 2012, which meant that all homes now had access to at least 70 channels (and often considerably more), challenging the dominance of the traditional BBC and ITV children's entertainment provision. Broadcasting for children migrated either to dedicated children's channels like the BBC's CBeebies for pre-school children and CBBC for older children (created in 2002) or commercial channels like The Cartoon Network or The Disney Channel. This kind of narrowcasting (to a specific audience niche) contrasts conceptually with broadcasting, which entails a mix of different genres of programmes for different audiences within a single schedule. Media convergence has meant that hitherto separate media technologies come together, so that a portable phone can play radio, TV or access an online newspaper, for example. Original and repeated programmes are available online, and broadcast programmes are supplemented by online content that can be accessed either via the television set or via the screen of another device (like a tablet computer or phone) used by a child at the same time as he or she is watching television (Ofcom, 2014b, pp. 23–54).

The state regulatory body for British telecommunications, Ofcom (2014a), reported that despite increased time spent online, watching television remained the most popular media activity for children (p. 10). However, the traditional broadcasters BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and Five were spending, on average, 15% less money on new children's programming in 2013 than in 2008 because they were showing numerous repeats of older programmes. This produces some continuity between what children watch now and the kinds of programmes discussed above; change in programmes and forms within the schedule is incremental rather than radical. Viewing of BBC's CBeebies and CBBC increased by 23%

over the 2008–13 period, and these two channels were dominant compared to the BBC's traditional commercial rival, ITV, as well as newer dedicated children's channels. One of the reasons for the BBC's leading position might be that children seem to prefer UK-made programmes, which constituted between 75 and 90% of the broadcast time on CBeebies and CBBC (Ofcom, 2014a), and these British programmes accounted for 45% of the time spent watching children's programming.

The repetition of programmes over long periods of time, and the presence of programmes on several platforms (e.g. on television, on broadcasters' websites or on YouTube) affects the significance and cultural role of broadcast music. Signature tunes and other musical motifs that identify programmes and distinguish them from one another become more important, as do other aspects of programme branding. Music's emotional resonance underpins the nostalgia for past television prevalent among adults in Britain and has a commercial value as one of the attractions of DVD releases of old children's programmes and compilations of music from children's radio and television. For example, audio CDs of broadcast children's music include *Hello Children Everywhere* (EMI, 2002) and *Children's Favourites* (Prism, 2002). In the insert for the latter, Tony Watts claims, 'For anyone who grew up in the Fifties or early Sixties many of the "favourites" included here will carry special resonances of their own, while both older and younger listeners will surely find them entertaining.' The pleasure of nostalgic repetition might also be a means to generate participation for new child listeners as well as a sense of belonging to a multi-generational audience community.

## Conclusion: Music, Communication and Broadcasting

The discourses around children's music evaluated in this article arose with the advent of radio, which shaped the concept of broadcast communication to a public constituted by and for programmes. Television's institutionalisation and the development of scheduling, consistent forms of audience address and a requirement to work for the public good extended this context in which norms for broadcasting children's music were negotiated. Until the advent of interactive television at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, television transmission and reception had a single form. This consisted of centrally-generated broadcast signals received by a mass audience imagined as a large public group; John Durham Peters (1999) described the ideal of broadcasting as 'an idealized [sic] configuration among speakers and audiences. It conjures visions of the agora, the town meeting, or the "public sphere"' (pp. 210–211). However, the audience was nevertheless atomised by its separation into single viewers or small groups watching their television sets or listening to their radios. The spatial distinction between transmission and reception entailed the necessary non-response of the audience to whom a broadcast was addressed, situating a gap, delay or absence as a constitutive fact of communication. The absence of the listener or viewer in this model of broadcasting haunted it and was remedied by attempts to provide channels of response from the audience back to the broadcaster, such as audience surveys or letter-writing to producers. Channels for communication between programmes and their viewers, and later the celebration of interactivity associated with online delivery of music and audio-visual products, can be understood as symptoms of an anxiety about the non-communication inherent in the nature of broadcasting itself, where messages may not arrive, may not be understood or may fail to produce a desired effect. Postmodern theories of communication even argue that the greater the effort expended to measure, survey, poll or profile audiences the more this bears witness to the fundamental unknowability of the Other to whom broadcast communications are addressed (Baudrillard, 1983, pp. 95–112), and in this respect a child audience is doubly Other because broadcasters cannot be children. Broadcasting is a hopeful form of dissemination that has been highly valued, and, similarly, the broadcasting of children's music demonstrates the social value that has been attributed both to music and to childhood. All

communication sets out relations between self and Other, and making music is always to make that music for an Other (or for the self as an Other). Broadcast children's music establishes a relation between the music and its listener, and this is almost always a relation between the roles of adult and child. The child audiences for broadcasts of children's music are thus both objects constructed by television and subjects invited to interact actively with it. They may be passive, positioned and interpolated by broadcasting, but becoming part of an audience means being an active appropriator of music in the complex social and cultural context that broadcasting entails.

## Author presentation

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